What Stands Behind a Waldorf School?

David S. Mitchell

If we were to ask, "What is this school that we call a Waldorf school," how would we answer? As is the case with all cultural institutions, the answer lies not with the buildings; schools have many types of buildings, from the gray, sturdy stone building of the Rudolf Steiner School in Manhattan to the breezy grass huts which serve as a school for the children at one of the Waldorf schools in South Africa. It does not lie with the teachers; over the course of time teachers leave an individual school and new ones will replace them. It does not even lie with the children; they too come and go, staying for up to 12 years and then leaving as others take their place. So, what do we mean when we speak about the Waldorf school? If it's not the building, the teachers, the parents, the children, then what is it? Does it have any reality at all? Is the "Waldorf school" merely the conjunction of two abstract nouns such as we use daily when we speak of "the U.S. Government" or "the World Environment," or the most unreal of all nouns, "money"? Do the words "Waldorf school" actually label something?

If they do, how has it come to be that teachers and administrators dedicate their life's work to one particular "Waldorf school," often subsidizing it at great personal sacrifice? Or why is it that parents extend themselves to the end of their economic limits to support it, and then volunteer when asked? Why is it that many students feel such a great connection to "their" school and their teachers even after they have left it? Could teachers, administrators, parents, and students feel the devotion, the loyalty, the love simply to a word that has no reality connected to it?

First of all, I contend there is no such thing as a Waldorf school—there are only schools striving to become Waldorf schools. A true Waldorf school is always in the state of becoming. This involves human striving and self-development during which teachers remain open, constantly observing, and focused on Waldorf ideals while being centered in the world.

There may never be a school that can meet the high ideals initially set by Rudolf Steiner and carried in some degree by every one of the more than 12,000 Waldorf teachers in the more than 1,000 schools around the world. To understand what these ideals are, we have to look at what is behind each effort that is striving to become a Waldorf school.

The school can be a force of destiny in our lives. Many teachers and parents have claimed that their life direction changed after they encountered Waldorf education. Why might this be? Behind the school there is a reality, there is something that we have to regard as a "being." We might call this the "genius" of the school in the original sense of the word—a "guiding spirit."

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If we look for a more specific example of how we can better understand this "genius" of the school, we can begin with the observation that each Waldorf school has its own unique character, its own biography, which aligns itself with the community around the school and its particular geography. For instance, Pine Hill Waldorf School in New Hampshire and Shining Mountain Waldorf School in Colorado—two schools where I have taught—are different not only because of geography nor because they have different histories, but because each has, quite literally, a different "spirit."

This is the reason why, if two Waldorf schools are faced with similar problems, a solution that suits one school may not be satisfactory for another school. It can also happen that a teacher who has been doing very well at one school does not have it so easy when he/she moves to another or vice versa. There is such a thing as being "in tune" with the "genius" of a school.

One way to get in tune with the "spirit" of a school is to do a collaborative study of your locality. Divide your group so that a few research the history of your immediate locality; others take on the geology, the meteorology, the topography, the botany, and so forth. Then share your findings with one another. This creates a sense of place and provides a picture for the astral, etheric, and ego background of the interpersonal interactions.[1] Another way is to seek the "genius" inwardly through meditative work. One person I know came in touch with the inner "being" of the school by donating practical services, working two days a week on the school grounds and beautifying the building. There are many ways, but the key is to be active.

All Waldorf schools evolve from the same philosophical consciousness, all adhere to the same developmental stages through the curriculum, all share certain methods and have to deal with the same kinds of problems, and yet despite these common features every school is an "individuality" with its own special destiny.

The "beings" who guide the destiny of each school are not single human personalities; they are concerned with groups of people—with teachers, administrators, parents, and children. They become interested only when their "activity" is part of an evolutionary process, when adults join forces, for example, and work towards a higher goal that does not serve any particular individuality.

Within the school it is a task of the College of Teachers to act as an instrument through which the guiding spirit of the school can work. It is within this College meeting that, in spite of the participants' personal shortcomings and inadequacies, school issues are debated and studied and the school evolves and grows.

If the life and growth of Waldorf schools were dependent on the wisdom, foresight, and knowledge present amongst the teachers, no school would last much longer than a couple of years. But, there is a wisdom which stands above our individual efforts—whether successful or unsuccessful—and somehow manages to keep these schools, and the entire Waldorf educational movement, growing in exponential leaps.

We could never abandon our College meetings and just trust that this "higher wisdom" would run the school. It is only because we are striving towards that wisdom—sacrificing time and energy to these endless discussions, giving something of ourselves to the school in these meetings—that a wisdom can flow down and work the miracle which is the existence of every school.

Today, giving up time and energy is akin to the ancients' offering up sacrifices to the gods; it opens the gates through which insights can flow. It is impossible to be a Waldorf teacher without a certain "enthusiasm" for the work we do with the children. It is the teacher's enthusiasm (the warmth we feel for our task), the cultivated devotion toward the children, and the sheer perseverance that makes teaching different from any regular 9-to-5 job. The ancients felt enthusiasm was the gift of Lucifer, the fallen, once-too proud angel. We could not exist as teachers, we simply would not be teachers without this element of enthusiasm within us.[2] In this, we balance upon a tightrope and our appearance in the world must be focused, healthy, and erect—like the knight with his lance riding in a gorge between Lucifer and Ahriman, who wish to pounce but are kept at bay by the centered knight.[3]

Without this gift of enthusiasm it would be difficult indeed to put up with all the daily problems and irritations—the misbehaving

child, the fractious colleague, the uncooperative parent, the load of work, and the inadequate pay. It needs a lot of enthusiasm to bear all this and to love one's work.

However, these Luciferic tendencies, which we all have, bring another and less beneficial gift: the tendency to "split up," to divide, and to create antipathies. So, on the one hand we have the guiding spirit of the school which unites us all—parents, administrators, and teachers—in service of the children; on the other, we have the force which would divide this unity and break it up.

We are faced with a universal social problem of our time: how to reconcile the claims of the individual with the demands of the community. The teacher may be in a situation that makes the problem more acute than it is anywhere else. It is easy to have reverence for the dignity of the individual child—it is far more difficult when it comes to the adults in our community. Karmic antipathy says hello to us in many strained moments.

When people work in an office, a store, or a factory, they are literally "working together" —they have to stand or sit beside their working companions. This special togetherness helps to create a feeling of fellowship, a common bond.

It is not so for the teacher whose work places him or her in a classroom where s/he is the only adult. S/he is with the children but, in the task, totally alone with no one else to help. Coupled with this is the tremendous responsibility that all teachers feel when they are shepherding their special group of children and helping them to unfold their knowledge. Every nuance, every gesture and tone can be significant to any particular child.

This level of responsibility requires a certain amount of inner strength and a strong personality. Children know instinctively whether the teacher has this strength—and they can be ruthless in making life a misery for the teacher who is not strong enough. The children are quite correct in their severity, for only this strength of personality gives the teacher the authority which the children need in the second seven-year period of their lives.

This inner strength, this strong personality, is a matter of personal destiny. Either one has it, or one hasn't. It can't be faked. While this strength of personality makes the teacher adequate for the classroom, it can make him or her less inclined to fit comfortably into a community.

One might think that the recipe for this situation would be a special effort on everyone's part to be social, to be nice to one another, to suppress one's own force field of individuality. This way, however, is hypocritical, a false front, and ultimately leads to defeat. The real remedy lies elsewhere.

In his book *Philosophy of Freedom*,[4] Rudolf Steiner points out that we all draw our moral intuitions from the same world of ideas. Therefore, truly free individuals acting out of moral intuitions could not possibly ever clash. We do not become teachers by reducing or suppressing the strength of ego forces, but by raising these forces to the heights of moral intuitions—the same intuitions on which we depend every day to deal with this or that problem in the class. It is only by making such moral intuitions the one and only guide for our working together with our colleagues that we can hope to become a community—a community of free individuals. Within our greater community—between parent/teacher, parent/parent, teacher/administrator/parent—one can awaken moral intuition by looking for "that which is striving" in the other, rather than at his/her sack of faults. Steiner recommended that we enter a meeting with the inner belief, "Everyone else has the most important thing to say!" This can be a mighty task, indeed. But, would it not be a wonderful inspiration for the children we teach and parent if we were to act as dignified, contained, role models in our social interchanges?

It is not by avoiding confrontations, for sometimes they are absolutely necessary; nor is it by tolerating those things which are

intolerable, but by summoning up within ourselves the "courage for the truth" that we bring uniqueness to our various Waldorf communities.

This "courage for the truth" requires from all of us a good measure of self knowledge, a knowledge of one's biases and prejudices, of one's purely personal motives and ambitions. It is this personal element which forms the dark clouds that obscure the clear light of our inspired intuitions. Unless we can disperse these clouds the light cannot shine.[5]

Light shines upon a group deliberation when one surrenders one's "selfness" while looking for a common answer. An experienced teacher told me that before every meeting he would randomly take a volume of Steiner's works and read a few paragraphs in order to create the mindset to leave everything personal outside of the meeting, focusing instead upon the greater perspective. He was honored as a colleague for his insightfulness, wisdom, and impartiality in debates.

It is not important how much we actually achieve by striving in this direction. Our achievements will always be inadequate to some degree, but it is the effort we make, the will we put into it, the sincerity of our intentions which will bring the help we need to create a Waldorf school. Our efforts to create and strengthen our community will be reaped tenfold by our children, for it is a secret in moral education that "what is transformed in the adult" will benefit the young in more mysterious ways than can be imagined.

Endnotes

1. For detailed directions, see "Geographical Exercises" at the end of the chapter entitled "Etheric Geography" in *The Riddles of America,* edited by John Wulsin from a lecture given at the AWSNA summer conference in Wilton, NH, during June of 1997.
2. Because class teachers work so intensively in the artistic realm, transforming the mundane into the extraordinary, infusing the material with the spiritual, they are subject to the influence of Luciferic beings who work through the imagination, inspiring flights of creativity and fantasy, bringing warmth and light to the art of teaching. Although some of our work draws on Lucifer's domain, we must be careful not to succumb to his temptations, and we must take active steps to combat his influence. – Roberto Trostli
3. See the etching of Albrecht Dürer, "Knight, Death, and the Devil" displayed New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art.

Riding steadfastly through a dark Nordic gorge, Dürer's knight rides upright past Death on a Pale Horse, who holds out an hourglass as a reminder of life's brevity, and is followed closely behind by a pig-snouted Devil. As the embodiment of moral virtue, the rider—modeled on the tradition of heroic equestrian portraits from Italy with which Dürer was familiar—is undistracted and true to his mission.

4. Rudolf Steiner, *Philosophy of Freedom*, Anthroposophic Press, 1996.
5. See AWSNA's *Young Schools' Guide*, chapters entitled "Foundations of the Waldorf Educator" and "What Is It That Makes a Waldorf Teacher Come Alive?" www.whywaldorfworks.org.

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